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Mexican President Fights Corruption

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) has taken a lot of heat for his hearings on corruption in Mexico. But while he may be faulted for lack of tact, there is no denying the seriousness of the problem. In past columns, we have exposed massive, top-to-bottom corruption.

Privately, the Mexicans themselves acknowledge this. The same high Mexican officials who complain about the indignity of the Senate disclosures readily admitted to Dale Van Atta on his three recent visits to Mexico that corruption is a critical problem that must be curbed.

The CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies recognize this as well. But in their latest National Intelligence Estimate on Mexico, they give President Miguel de la Madrid credit for doing more than his predecessors to fight corruption.

"In particular," the secret report states, "he has worked to distance himself from the egregious corruption and failures of President Lopez Portillo (1976-1982) . . . by pursuing an anticorruption campaign that has included the imprisonment of at least one former high official and revelations of abuses by others, and by projecting an image of fairness, competence and probity."

In fact, the secret report suggests that the most serious threat to de la Madrid's government would be the popular perception that he is not living up to his campaign promise of "moral renovation."

Eight of 10 Mexicans in a recent poll said they believed "that the country's current crisis is the fault of corrupt or inept officials who enriched themselves while in office," the intelligence report states. It adds:

"Though bribery, influence peddling and nepotism and illegal profiting have historically been accepted elements of the political and social systems, corruption reached such excessive and conspicuous levels during the oil boom years that senior party and government officials as well as some labor leaders are apparently blamed by many for most of the country's current problems."

The report predicted that de la Madrid will persist in his anticorruption campaign, at least for a while, but warned of "dangers in his proceeding too quickly or casting the net too widely."

As we pointed out two years ago in a series on the high-level corruption and profiteering that were bringing the country to its knees, Mexico's problems have a far more direct and important effect on the United States than those of Nicaragua and El Salvador combined.

The Helms Foreign Relations subcommittee that deals with Mexico had planned to hold hearings last fall. A key Helms aide wrote a memo to the senator listing the topics for the hearing: U.S. economic aid to Mexico; "Mexican crimes against Americans" (such as the murder of a U.S. narcotics agent in February 1985), "corruption in Mexico," "fraud in Mexican elections," "failure of land reform" and "religious persecution."

The hearings were postponed because of the Mexico City earthquakes last September, and then they were delayed further by other foreign-policy crises: the fall of Haitian dictator Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier and the ouster of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos.